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## DE-CONSTRUCTING PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT IN 2020: A PERSPECTIVE INSPIRED BY PAULO FREIRE

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### Abstract

This article explores the "mindprint" of Paulo Freire upon processes of social change in Brazil, with a particular focus on how his liberating pedagogy has influenced practices of participatory communication and civil society development. In exploring the legacy of Freire, his work is approached from the perspective of communication. This constitutes an original contribution as it positions Freire's work within a communication epistemology and his vision as one of communication. A brief rigorous review is conducted of the history and development of citizen engagement in Brazil from the 1950s until 2020, identifying key phases of democratic development, and the legacy of Freire herein assessed. It is found that rather than representing specific policies or formal educational projects, Paulo Freire has become a key symbol and inspiration that has influenced a broad gamut of civil society, and continues, in a variety of forms and contexts, to inspire social change processes in Brazil.

### Keywords

Paulo Freire, participatory communication, civil society, Brazil

## DECONSTRUYENDO LA COMUNICACIÓN PARTICIPATIVA Y EL DESARROLLO DE LA SOCIEDAD CIVIL EN 2020: UNA PERSPECTIVA INSPIRADA EN PAULO FREIRE

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### Resumen

Este artículo examina las "huellas intelectuales" de Paulo Freire en relación con procesos de cambio social en Brasil, prestando especial atención a cómo su pedagogía liberadora ha influido en prácticas de comunicación participativa y de desarrollo de la sociedad civil. Concretamente, los autores posicionamos la obra y visión de Paulo Freire dentro de una epistemología de la comunicación. Junto con ello, bosquejamos un breve pero riguroso examen de la historia y el desarrollo de procesos de participación ciudadana en Brasil entre 1950 y 2020, identificando fases clave de desarrollo democrático y la relación de éstas con el legado de Freire. Sugerimos que, en vez de representar la encarnación de políticas específicas o proyectos educativos al amparo del Estado, Paulo Freire se ha transformado en símbolo e inspiración para una amplia gama de la sociedad civil brasileña, influyendo profundamente en procesos de cambio social en diversas formas y contextos.

### Palabras clave

Paulo Freire, comunicación participativa, sociedad civil, Brasil

## 1. Introduction

The starting point of our transit was exactly that closed society that we have already referred to. Society, it should be added, with the decision-making center of its economy outside it. Therefore, the economy is driven by an external market. Exporter of raw material. Growing out. Predatory. Society introjected in its economy. Introjected in its culture. Therefore, alienated. Object and not subject to itself. Lacking a people. Anti-dialogic, hindering upward vertical social mobility. Lacking urban life or with precarious urban life. With alarming rates of illiteracy, still persisting today. Underdeveloped. Commanded by an elite superimposed on its world, instead of integrated with it. (Freire, 1967: 48, our translation)

Paulo Freire used this description to refer to the Brazilian society just after the 1964 military coup. If he were to make a quick visit to his country in 2020, he would have probably been very surprised to realise he could use almost the same words to describe it. Worse, he would have seen most of these features amplified by the global COVID-19 emergency and a national political crisis that took the lives of thousands of Brazilians, striking strongly the most vulnerable. Yet in all likelihood, he would have been less surprised by the fact that, as in many other episodes of Brazilian history, he and his work had become targets of criticism. Even before winning the 2018 presidential elections, Jair Bolsonaro and his followers had chosen Freire as a symbol to condensate everything they wanted to sweep out of the horizon, accusing him of the political indoctrination of students, “gender ideology”, as well as of undermining the educational level of Brazilians (Haddad, 2019).

In a country that has historically excluded important sectors of the population from civic engagement and political participation (Eakin, 2017), the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted persisting structural social, political and economic inequalities, revealing also that a necropolitical project (Mbembé & Meintjes, 2003), such as the one brought by Bolsonaro, necessarily includes an alienation project to cover predatory practices in favour of old and new oligarchical elites. As we discuss in this article and throughout this special issue, the ideas, values and figure of Paulo Freire have become a threat to that project. Although the main subject of Freire’s work is education, he became an important source of inspiration and

intellectual orientation to communication scholars and practitioners, as well as to social movements and other political actors all over the world. His struggle against inequality, calls for social transformation and his defence of dialogue have transformed him into a dangerous figure for current authorities, who wish to eradicate his legacy.

In another special issue published by *International Communication Gazette* (Suzina, et al., 2020), we explored participatory communication, civil society development and the emergence of the (extreme) right under the perspective of Freire. That collection of articles discusses different aspects in which the attacks against Freire in Brazil constitute one face of an international spread of conservatism in politics and culture. From Brazil to the United States, from England to Spain, from France to Poland and to Ukraine, the claim for speaking on behalf of “the people” has taken nuances very different from the popular emancipatory project with which Freire has dreamed of and fought for.

In this special issue, we discuss the role of Paulo Freire in relation to the conditions of democratic development in contemporary Brazil. More concretely, the articles here look at how diverse expressions of civil society —institutions, movements, minorities, the youth— engage with Freire’s principles to carve out spaces of civic participation and fight against predatory practices that are in the roots of the current international socio-political crisis. Both publications originated from a seminar held in June 2019 at Loughborough University London, which gathered around 30 scholars from several countries discussing the legacy of Paulo Freire and searching for inspiration and collaborative learning to better understand the current challenges faced by civil society in the world.

This introductory article sets the scene for this special issue. Throughout it, we revisit a recent historical path of social struggles and mobilizations in Brazil, searching for Freire’s footprints —or “mindprints”, maybe—. These footprints are often underpinned on Freire’s normative framework of education, which is strongly grounded in communication processes. The fundament of his *praxis* stands in fact in the conviction that humans were conceived to communicate to each other. Relatedly, for Freire, education is the core element for social change



because of its central role in the production, reproduction and/or transformation of the cognitive building of any society; and this is mainly a collective process. In the 2000s, a posthumous book recalled one of his affirmations that “changing requires knowing that change is possible” (Freire, 2000: 26).

Significantly, in the dialogues during the seminar in London, many contributors shared a common perception of a certain omnipresence of Freire even in places, processes and trajectories that were not objectively engaged with his thoughts. We understand that Freire’s perspectives were absorbed in many different ways and levels, shaping participatory communication and civil society development in Brazil and all over the world because they forged a methodology of research and teaching-learning, a theory of communication and a Latin American epistemology, thus opening the path for important theoretical developments in many other fields (Suzina & Tufte, 2020). Hence, we argue that since the second half of the twentieth century, Paulo Freire has become an engine —even if not always explicit— in the continuous and unfinished struggle to expand citizenship, democracy and participatory communication in Brazil and elsewhere.

In the following, we firstly outline Freire’s key vision of change, arguing it goes far deeper and beyond the educational sector. This is underscored by introducing and discussing key principles of his liberating pedagogy. Then follows the review of democratic development in Brazil, chronologically structured in seven sections. This review emphasizes the inquiry into how Freire’s ideas influence community-based and non-governmental processes of change, but also assesses how his ideas have informed formal institutional developments. The article concludes by reaffirming the fluctuating but consistent omnipresence of Freire over time and it ends by introducing how the subsequent five contributions to this special issue shed light on various aspects of Freire’s contemporary influence on Brazilian development: knowledge production (Gonzalez), youth engagement (Ayres & Peruzzo), minorities’ conscientization (Custódio & Gathuo), cultural institutions (Lima) and social movements (Conceição et al.).

## Freire's communicative vision and key principles to pursue it

Paulo Freire is one of the most influential Brazilian and Latin American intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work has achieved significant global impact, with leading positions in rankings and international tributes. There are research centers named after him in Finland, South Africa, Austria, Germany, The Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom, United States, Canada. Among Brazilians, he has the greatest number of Doctor Honoris Causa titles: at least 35 titles including universities in Brazil and abroad (among them: Geneva, Bologna, Stockholm, Massachusetts, Illinois and Lisbon) (Veiga, 2019).

In 2016, the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was the only Brazilian authored book to appear among the 100 most referred works recommended in syllabus in English speaking universities, according to Open Syllabus. It scored the 99th place in the general list and 2nd place when concerning only programs in the field of education (G1, 2016). This same book was identified as the third most quoted book in academic works in the field of Social Sciences, according to Google Scholar stats (Green, 2016).

Whilst Freire's work was primarily concerned with education, it inspired —and continues to do so— generations of communication scholars and practitioners, social movements and other political actors. Peruzzo (2020) in fact holds that Freire's vision, more than pedagogical, is a vision of communication. As she states, communication is profoundly inscribed into his model of teaching and learning. It is part and parcel of a permanent exchange between teachers and students, so intense that it puts them in interchangeable positions as equal bearers of a diversity of knowledges. As Freire affirms, “[e]ducator-pupil and pupil-educator, in the liberating educational process, they are both knowing subjects in the face of knowable objects, which mediate them” (Freire, 2013: 69, our translation). Relatedly, Waisbord (2020) summarizes that, for Freire, “communication is how we learn to be human” and highlights how his work displays several features that configure a “blueprint for democratic communication”.

For Freire, the main goal of any educational process is to liberate human beings, with special attention to the oppressed. This liberating goal is accomplished when educator(s) and student(s) reach communion and name the world together (Freire, 2013: 83), which could not be more of a communication epistemology. At the core of the Freirean approach to education is dialogue, which is crucial to visualise its relationship with theories and practices of communication. Dialogue, for him, is more than a relational approach; it is the main requirement for individuals to become historical subjects.

That is why existing is a dynamic concept. It implies an eternal dialogue between one man and another. Between the man and the world. Between the man and his Creator. It is this man's dialogue *about* the world and *with* the world itself, about challenges and problems, that makes him historic. (Freire, 1967: 59, our translation and highlights)

Dialogue is, therefore, a cross-cutting principle. And it only makes sense within another communicative dimension, that of writing. The human being ceases to be an object and becomes a subject when he/she not only reads the world, but (re)writes it (Freire, 2017). Inclusion involves the ability to explain oneself and explain the world. This is what we can see in two of the case studies presented in this issue by Cássia Ayres and Cicilia Peruzzo, and by Leonardo Custódio and Monica Gathuo, as well as in the collective reflection brought by Elisabet (Bete) Cerqueira da Conceição, Luiz Enrique Gomes de Moura, Camila Freitas and Paola Sartoretto.

According to Freire, liberating education takes place collectively. Nobody educates anyone; we learn together mediated by the world (Freire, 2017). The humanization outlined by Freire, as his project for social equality, is a community process, of mutual liberation. In *Educação como Prática da Liberdade* (Freire, 1967), in which Freire talks extensively about democracy (in the context of and referring to the military dictatorship in Brazil, 1964-1985), he calls the nation a “community” in several passages. Democracy is community. Development is communal. His conception of education as a practice of freedom therefore involves the valorisation of words, the authentic word (Freire, 2017), and the constitution of a national community with the participation of all its members.

It is not enough for the people immersed in their secular silence to emerge giving voice to their demands. They must still be able to critically and prospectively elaborate their awareness in order to overcome the rebellious behaviour towards responsible and active integration in a democracy to be done, in a collective and national development project. (Furter, 1967)

When looking at the notion of community from Freire's perspective, it should be acknowledged the need to speak of communities in plural, or of the plurality of communities. There is no community development formula because Freire is averse to "transplanted solutions" (Freire, 2013), but there is a fundamental premise that is to promote the self-determination of each community so that it knows how to read its reality, understand its problems and exercise its responsibility, which implies making decisions about its own directions. Above all, Freire defends freedom from the perspective of a critical transitivity, meaning that communities need to develop their freedom.

This highlights other core concepts in the Freirean work, namely problematization and conscientization. He defines the first as "the reflection that someone exercises on a content, the result of an act, or on the act itself, to act better, *with others*, in reality" (Freire, 2013: 73, our translation and highlight), which leads him to affirm that "conscientization is inter-conscientization" (Freire, 2013: 51), as expressed in the case study described by Custódio and Gathuo (2020) in this issue. Civil society development, under this perspective, begins with the cognitive freedom, and with the development of the capacity of thinking by oneself within a collective process of reflection.

Perhaps, strictly speaking, we could say that the verb that designates the act of reflecting, more than purely transitive, should be one that had, as a syntactic regime, the object of action and a complement of company. (...) The reflecting subject cannot think alone; can't think without the co-participation of other subjects in the act of thinking about the object. There is no "I reflect", but instead "we reflect". It is the "we reflect" that establishes the "I reflect", and not the other way around. (Freire, 2013: 57, our translation)

As Ayres and Peruzzo (this issue) remind us, Freire's pedagogy of liberation has a popular and community nature. They recall that "by transforming pedagogy, therefore, the cognitive dimensions of the literacy process must include the



relationships of men with their world". The liberating education happens with students, and social change occurs in the transformation of each human being as a subject with other subjects (Freire, 2013). The relationship with the world is consequently another crucial aspect to comprehend the Freirean perspective.

Paulo Freire never engaged in a purely academic dialogue or simply intended to change the educational policies of the government in office. His goals were much broader. As Furter observes (1967), when Freire understood that inequalities made his high pedagogical demands unfeasible, he assumed an explicit political role, which can be associated with his short —and yet not very successful— experiences within public administration. "The transformation of the world to which the dream aspires is a political act", he stated in one of his letters (Freire, 2000, our translation). His method was already essentially grounded with the experience of adult literacy in the poor North-eastern Brazilian countryside — which led him to exile during dictatorship— and developed into a large collection of essays in which pedagogical issues were discussed within a framework of debates related with democracy, citizen participation, community development, and mainly social justice. His foundational influence was also seen in the field of communication for development and social change where his ideas informed several generations of scholars and practitioners engaged with participatory communication (documented in Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006). In consequence, Freire was never restricted by academic straitjackets or formal institutions —on the opposite, science and public institutions should be, for him, the platforms to fight the inequalities that disable the liberating education that could, itself, renew scientific and political practices—. As the following sections show, throughout his lifetime Freire aspired to a broader and ultimately deeper radical change in the way people engage and produce knowledge together, in order to alter the structural conditions in which they live.

## **Freire's early experiences: community-based engagement and face-to-face communication**

The legacy of Freire's influence, and its relation both to the state and to civil society, are closely associated to the history and development of civil society in Brazil. Since he began developing his pedagogy in the late 1940s, Freire approached education as a community-based non-governmental process, closely associated with social movements, CBOs and other associations closely connected with low-income, often marginalized communities —landless peasants being his case in point—. Freirean pedagogy was based on principles of face-to-face communication to make dialogue happen. Consequently, from the outset, and throughout his lifetime, Freire discarded the use of mass communication in his liberating pedagogical praxis. In addition, although Freire's praxis has at several points in time been attempted as a public policy and practice in Brazil, it has never become a fully integrated policy of education. There were two peak moments in this experience, but, as discussed later, both encountered obstacles.

Some of the earliest experiences that illustrate both the features of Paulo Freire's pedagogy were in his work in Recife in the years leading up to the military coup in Brazil in 1964. In 1960 Freire was appointed as research director of a non-profit organisation called "Movimento de Cultura Popular" (MCP, or Movement for Popular Culture). MCP was based in Recife, the capital of the Northeastern state of Pernambuco, where Freire also came from. MCP was initiated and led by key intellectuals in the region but closely associated with the Catholic Church and with the Mayor of Recife at the time, the social democrat Miguel Arraes. Elections were forthcoming, but in line with Brazil's historical limits to democratic participation, to vote you had to be literate. The movement therefore launched a large literacy campaign in strong collaboration both with sections of the Catholic Church, and with the municipality. As media scholar José Marques de Melo indicates, to get off the ground with your civil society initiatives, you don't get anywhere without a collaboration with the state (Marques de Melo in Tufte, 2018: 4).

Although MCP was successful in rolling out literacy programs, there were conflicting pedagogical and ideological positions. MCP opted to do distance education over the radio, something Freire strongly opposed. In 1961 he left the MCP, developed his method further while at the University of Pernambuco, and

was shortly after invited to implement his pedagogy in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Shortly after that, he was invited by the Minister of Education to direct a national literacy program which spread to many states across Brazil, including to Pernambuco. Marques de Melo was a young journalism student at the time and became involved when Freire's literacy program was implemented in Pernambuco in 1963, in the months preceding the military coup that happened in late March 1964: "The actual alphabetization justified the Coup a lot. They (those doing alphabetization, ed) were said to be preparing the revolution, to be a subversive movement..." (Marques de Melo in Tufte, 2018: 6). After the military coup Freire fled to Chile, where he wrote his two first books. He did not return to Brazil until 15 years later, when he was granted amnesty.

It was apparent that Freire's ideas on one hand were attractive to left-leaning governments, but they were also community-based and slow. At that time, the dialogic, non-imposing face-to-face process appeared to some as conservative and un-modern vis-à-vis the fascination of and attraction towards using radio as an efficient and novel instrument of mass education. Such mass media driven practices seemed to clash with Freire's dialogic, bottom-up and community based pedagogical principles. Freire did in fact develop a fast-track version of his pedagogy, some of which was incorporated in his work with the state of Rio Grande do Norte and the national government initiative. However, from the outset, Freire's pedagogy, while maybe revolutionary in the outcome, that of "conscientization", its method, dialogic, bottom-up and community based, spoke far more to smaller settings. Hence the relevance towards the Brazilian civil society.

## **Political repression and christian communities as a space of dialogue**

It was during the military dictatorship in Brazil that Freire's ideas were written into books and began circulating nationally and internationally. With the military coup on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1964, and following 70 days of imprisonment, Freire fled into exile, first briefly in Bolivia but then to Chile, where he lived the following

5 years working for FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) and for the Christian Agrarian Reform Movement. He then accepted a visiting professorship at Harvard for a year (1970) before going to work for the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva until his return to Brazil in 1980. His first couple of years in exile were seminal in the sense that between 1965 and 1968 he wrote two of his most important books, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). They both draw on his years of experience from adult education in Brazil. A third, also important book, came in 1973, which was *Extension or Communication*, drawing on his Chilean experience with agricultural development and the struggle for land reform.

However, during Freire's exile, Brazil experienced the most severe years of political repression, with serious crackdowns on human rights, and with very limited space for citizen engagement. One of the few spaces for reflection and critique that developed in the 1970s and most of the 1980s were the Christian Base Communities, the CEBs (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base). In the 1960s, progressive policies and practices developed within parts of the Catholic Church. These new directions were sparked by debates at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and reinforced by the Second Episcopal Conference for Latin American, held in Medellin, Colombia in 1968. These events led to a strong reaffirmation and development of the social commitment of the Catholic Church. The Church's community presence was reinforced by the arrival of many new priests from especially Europe to Latin America. The process was underscored by the development of a critical Marxist-inspired Latin American Liberation Theology in the 1970s and 1980s. This theology was strongly focused on addressing the structural violence in society and the widespread poverty resulting from the structural injustices. Key scholars in the development of Liberation Theology included the Peruvian bishop Gustavo Gutiérrez (Gutiérrez, 1973) and the Brazilian theologians and philosophers, the brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (Boff & Boff, 1987).



The CEBs were community-based spaces that began to emerge, assembling a broad gamut of community leaders, activists, Catholic lay people that all came together to address the poverty-related issues in their community. The CEBs became crucial spaces for dialogue and critique. This was not only in Brazil, but seen across Latin America.

These political, theological and organisational developments within the Catholic Church coincided with the circulation of Freire's ideas. His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was translated into English and Spanish in 1970, and was circulating widely in Brazil, Latin America and internationally. In Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s, both liberation theology *and* liberating pedagogy came together as foundational inspirations to the CEBs. The latter have been attributed a significant role as a seminal space of dialogue and development of action, reflection and action during the military dictatorship and in the struggle for democracy in Brazil in the late 1970s and up into the 1980s. They are widely recognized as instrumental in the civil society development that was possible during the military dictatorship, and they preceded the intensification of citizen engagement that came to characterize the 1980s. At the centre of their praxis were the ideas of Paulo Freire.

## Prefigurative institutionalities

Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues in his book *The End of the Cognitive Empire* for the role of social struggles in the development of the epistemologies of the South. The social struggles “point to practices of criticism and possibility, nonconformity and resistance, denunciation and counterproposal (...) the extrainstitutional is often no more than testing new institutionalities and new pedagogies” (Santos, 2018: 248). Many of the processes of change of Brazil in the 1980s aligned with this characteristic. As we have analysed elsewhere, Santos' work with developing and defining the field of “epistemologies of the South” was highly inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (Suzina & Tufte, 2020; Santos, 2018). Throughout the struggle for democracy in Brazil in these years a dynamic process of interaction could be seen between Freirean processes of conscientization and a testing of new institutionalities:

The epistemologies of the South are not confined to institutional practices. They combine institutional and the extra-institutional practices. They are political to the extent that they constitute ways of knowing and validating knowledge that aim to contribute to the refoundation of insurgent policies capable of efficiently confronting the current, insidious, and techno-savage articulations between capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Such policies, just like the epistemologies grounding them, occur inside and outside of institutions, in parliaments, governments, and judicial systems, as well as, whether formally or informally, in streets, squares, communities, and social networks. (Santos, 2018: 248)

Santos called the social struggle and the movements engaging in them as “prefigurative institutionalities” (Santos, 2018: 249). He argued that “prefigurative institutionalities and pedagogies are ways of organizing collective conviviality and promoting liberating learning processes capable of credibly accomplishing, here and now and on a small scale, another possible future world” (Santos, 2018: 249). What was seen in Brazil in the 1980s and up into the 1990s had many such processes and dynamics unfolding. In the 1980s the community-based and bottom-up processes of citizen engagement were thus significant. A very strong articulation of a broad gamut of social movements, black communities, women, LGBT communities, the landless movement, youth and many others were mushrooming across the country. Following what the military dictatorship launched in 1979 as a controlled “opening” - including an amnesty to many of the citizens that were forced into exile in 1964 —including Paulo Freire—, the 1980s became a very dynamic period of popular participation in the history of Brazil’s democratic development.

The early 80s were characterized by citizens engaging in resistance towards the dictatorship, and from early 1984 in the struggle for elections, the *Diretas Já* movement. After elections were held in 1985 the National Constituent Assembly was formed in 1986, and a two-years process of writing a new Constitution began. A massive social mobilisation was seen around the process that led to the 1988 Constitution. Paulo Freire was part and parcel of this process, both personally and through the widespread use of his philosophy and method of education amongst grassroots movements. It demonstrated the case of how Freire’s liberating education was a collective process that ran deeper and aimed at influencing broader processes of social change, beyond the education sector.

In 1988 municipal elections were held, where the Workers Party, PT, won its first significant political victory. Luiza Erundina was elected mayor of Sao Paulo, the biggest city in South America, and she sat in office from 1989 to 1992. With Erundina's victory, the municipal government made a large replacement of civil servants, recruiting a very large number of community leaders from the vast gamut of social movements in and around Sao Paulo. They became civil servants in Erundina's government, leading in part to an impasse in the social movements they came from. On the other hand, it allowed for a testing of these new institutionalities and new pedagogies that were inspired by Freire and grounded in a strong rights-based strive for social justice.

### **Attempts at institutionalisation: Freire and Brazilian educational models in the 1990s**

In 1990, Paulo Freire was invited to become Secretary of Education in the Municipality of São Paulo. During the 1980s he had been an advisor to the workers party on their adult literacy projects, but now, for the second time in his life, he was offered a governmental platform to work with his pedagogy, rolling it out as part of the Erundina Municipal Government's educational policy. The experience was short-lived and not particularly successful. Freire stepped down again in 1991, before the end of his mandate. Freire's efforts became a difficult-to-implement experience. They were taking place in a political climate influenced by the President at the time, Collor de Melo. Collor was the first directly elected president after the military coup, and he brought a strong neoliberal economic agenda with him. This occurred hand-in-hand with the Washington Consensus, a set of free-market economic principles coined as such in 1989 that came to influence the policies of IMF and the World Bank in their loan-giving to Latin American countries at this time, hence also influencing policy and practice of the Brazilian state (Girotti, 2009: 102).

Marilena Chaui years later analysed some of the obstacles to achieve “full democracy” in Brazil, identifying “social authoritarianism” and “depolitization” as two key issues impacting negatively upon democratic development and negatively influencing the prospect of developing a new pedagogy and school practice within the Brazilian public education system (Chauí, 2006). Chauí argued that the process of social authoritarianism meant the naturalization of social inequity, rooted in a political structure that did not fundamentally question the inequity. Rather, it reinforced existing knowledge hierarchies, and social and economic structures. Linked to this political analysis she argued that the introduction of a neoliberal perception of the state came with its growing depolitization. This contributed to a reinforcement of a particular way of relating and doing politics which built on legendary principles of clientelism, leaving a lot aside for the development of a transparent and accountable public sphere.

Girotti (2009) drew on Chauí to identify the challenges in developing new public policy and new educational models in Brazil. The national public policies in the 1990s and onwards came to be profoundly influenced by neoliberal conceptions of the state, reinforcing the above described processes. Civil society development was also influenced by those principles, leading to what some scholars defined as NGO-ization, as a process that ended up by changing the very nature of collective action worldwide (Dagnino & Tatagiba, 2010). Coming from a positive experience of demanding and taking part in the design of the new National Constitution, participation in Brazil became very oriented towards political institutions, which included the displacement of previous militants to public administration offices and the professionalization of practices in the sense of making civil society capable of intervening in public policy cycles. They conflicted with the principles of a Freirean liberating pedagogy and its opportunities for success in a public educational system. Hence, Freirean pedagogies never managed to become institutionalized.



## Citizenship schools and participatory budgeting

Parallel to Freire's own efforts in public office, his former student and later colleague, Moacir Gadotti, was instrumental in establishing the Institute Paulo Freire (IPF) in 1991, a Brazil based think tank, advocating and cultivating the legacy of Freire still today. This institute set forth to cultivate the ideas of Freire, cater for his legacy and promote his ideas worldwide. One of IPF's key programmes became the *escola pela cidadania* (Citizenship School) which set forth to develop an educational model "which recognizes, in the different subjects who participate in it, citizens whose main right is to decide on the political, social and economic aspects that directly or indirectly affect their lives" (Girrotti, 2009: 101, our translation). This program continues to exist as part of IPF today.

Alongside the experience in Sao Paulo, Porto Alegre was another city in Brazil where new institutionalities and new pedagogies were tried out in the early 1990s. The Workers Party won the mayor of the city in 1988 and embarked on what became a world renown experience in participatory budgeting. The political and pedagogical experience was similar to that of Sao Paulo in the sense that with the electoral victory in 1988, many of the civil society activists of the 1980s were recruited into public policy management and implementation. They brought with them their experiences of social struggle, mobilization and Freirean "conscientization" from the formative years in the 1980s. Liberating learning processes acquired from community-driven grassroots experiences were put on trial at municipal level in the early 1990s.

The experience of participatory budgeting came to grow to include 180 cities in Brazil, 120 of which were among the 250 largest in the country, and internationally, for example Paris in 2014 (Tuftes, 2017: 69-73). They were also incorporated into the Kenyan Constitution of 2010, where decentralization of public spending resulted in the largest devolution process to district level responsibility for public spending in the history of Kenya. With it came civil society mobilization to enhance the participatory process in order to hold local government accountable.

Valuable experiences were thus achieved in public service development and delivery across Brazil and internationally. However, the fact remains that Paulo Freire's method was deeply engrained in the history and legacy of the early civil society development in Brazil. This legacy continued more under the radar in the next two decades, where the civil society developments took a new turn.

### **Civil society developments in the 1990s-2000s: Paulo Freire out of sight**

The early 1990s still saw some significant civil society mobilisation. A new generation of activists, the *Anjos Rebeldes* (the Rebel Angels that were largely secondary school youth), poured into the streets across the country in August 1992. This constituted a significant moment in the history of social mobilization in Brazil and led to the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello in December 1992 (Tufte, 2000).

However, popular participation became less visible and scarce in the years that followed. Rather, what was seen in the 1990s and into the 2000s was that a series of new actors began appearing and becoming part of a new civil society in Brazil. While social movements continued to exist, the mentioned "NGOization" of civil society unfolded, influenced by the establishment of foundations, philanthropic associations and a growing discourse about and private sector activity in the area of corporate social responsibility. In only 7 years, from 1995 to 2002, the third sector in Brazil grew by 157%, from 107.000 organizations to 276.000 (Bacci, 2011). This illustrates the shift towards a more formal structure of civil society in Brazil at the time. While some social movements continued to exist and develop, the MST being a notable example (see Conceição et al., this volume) a certain institutionalization of the social struggle also occurred.

Critiques of this NGOization suggested it was leading to depolitization, fragmentation and to a strengthening of links to the state at the risk of autonomy (Montano, 2007). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the legacy of Paulo Freire became less articulate and more difficult to identify. Freire himself died in 1997,

and the country moved into a phase which came to be marked by the political victories of the Workers Party, amidst growing political polarization and economic fluctuations.

Yet a notable phenomenon which shed light on the legacy of Brazil's social movements, giving historical and global resonance to the legacy of Paulo Freire, was the organisation of the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001. It became a major global gathering of social movements and a broad variety of grassroots organisations, CBOs, NGO, INGOs from across the globe all assembled in Porto Alegre around a common slogan of "Another World is Possible". Boaventura de Sousa Santos was one of the eminent public intellectuals informing the debates. He states:

It is no coincidence that the WSF should emerge in Brazil, in a context of great activism among social movements, which led to the election of progressive governments in several countries on the continent, from Venezuela to Argentina, from Bolivia to Ecuador, from Brazil to Chile. Most of the progressive political transformations occurred in the first decade of the 2000s. Many of these governments faced crises in the following period. (Santos, 2018: 331)

The Instituto Paulo Freire was a member of the International Council of the World Social Forum and of the Global Education Forum (*Fórum Mundial de Educação*). As the director emeritus of IPF, Moacir Gadotti, argues: "These Fora would not have emerged in Brazil were it not for the history of struggles seen in more than 50 years of the popular education movement, of which Paulo Freire is one of the greatest inspirations" (Gadotti & Carnoy, 2018: 13). The WSF continue still today, and although they have lost their convening power and their political clout, they were a strong manifestation of the Brazilian and Latin American legacy of social struggle which Freire's ideas had significantly influenced for decades.

## Back to public debate: Paulo Freire and civil society developments in the 2010s

The past decade saw the ideas and legacy of Paulo Freire returning to the spotlight. In 2012, three years after receiving a posthumous amnesty and apology on behalf of the Brazilian state, the National Congress named Freire patron of Brazilian education (Haddad, 2019). Yet only a limited number of his ideas actually influenced educational policies put forward by the government of Dilma Rousseff (Ireland, 2018). One year later, the country was shaken by the biggest series of protests that the country had experienced since the demonstrations demanding the impeachment of Collor de Mello in 1992. The protests, which became known as the *Jornadas de Junho*, saw thousands of people drawing on participatory communication —particularly through the use of digital technologies— to strengthen civil society, calling for solidarity, community building and an expansion of citizenship rights. They were originally celebrated as a triumph of democracy and a confirmation of Brazil's insertion in global expressions of civic society, with comparisons to the Arab Spring, the *Indignados* in Spain as well as the Gezi Park demonstrations in Turkey (Conde & Jazeel, 2013; Gohn, 2014). Recent interpretations have however been more ambivalent, observing that whilst the protests effectively expressed a deep dissatisfaction with dominant socio-political and economic structures, they also announced and triggered a period of social, political and economic crisis (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Peruzzo, 2013; Suzina, 2019; see also Ayres & Peruzzo, this issue).

Paulo Freire was barely explicitly mentioned by those taking to the streets in 2013, but the *Jornadas de Junho*, particularly in its early stages, were infused with Freirean ideas of solidarity, dialogue, social critique and rejection of neoliberalism, especially through the communication of grassroots demands for better education, healthcare and social justice (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Suzina, 2019). The *Jornadas de Junho* not only made visible the dissatisfaction of millions of Brazilians towards underlying structural inequalities. They also put in question the belief that Brazilians have little interest in political participation, an unsustainable myth when taking into account examples of civic engagement in previous decades.



Although grievances were increasingly volatile and contradictory throughout the *Jornadas de Junho*, they confirmed how the Freirean thinking has become a core stream of influence within significant sectors of Brazil's civil society and is nowadays part of the habitus of many activists (Gohn, 2009; Peruzzo, 2008).

Civil participation took however a darker turn towards the end of the *Jornadas de Junho*, when middle and upper-class individuals, of predominantly conservative affiliation or straightforwardly right-wing, discovered the power of social organisations and digital media to advance a conservative, populist-nationalist, neoliberal and sometimes militarist agenda. Organisations either born out of the *Jornadas de Junho* or strengthened by them, such as *Movimento Brasil Livre*, *Revoltados Online* or *Vem Pra Rua*, returned to the streets in early 2015, to demand the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. This series of demonstrations—which sometimes clashed with other groups supporting Rousseff—intended to portray the then-governing Workers' Party as a source of corruption, authoritarianism and inefficiency, and both Rousseff and former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as political figures to topple (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Pinto, 2017; Vrydagh & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020).

In their communication strategies, several of these groups intended to co-opt the language and actions of previous examples of civic engagement and participatory communication in Brazil, claiming to act on behalf of “common people”, calling for a radical transformation of socio-political structures in Brazil, as well as portraying themselves as victims of a supposedly oppressive left-wing “establishment” (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Vrydagh & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020). This argument has also been put forward in other settings, for instance by supporters of Trump in the United States or Brexit in the United Kingdom (e.g. Nagle, 2017) as well as by Spanish right wing parties and mobilizations (Ferreira, 2019). Similarities with previous examples of civic engagement are however only superficial, and they in fact contradict basic principles of participatory communication (see Tufte, 2017). While these groups effectively aimed to use communication strategies to empower themselves and change society, they disseminated fake news, very rarely engaged in dialogue, sought for confrontation and the fragmentation of a sense of

community, embraced rather than rejected neoliberalism and, more substantially, did not intend to tackle structural social inequalities (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Vrydagh & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020).

Significantly, Paulo Freire and his legacy were an explicit target of right-wing demonstrators, who accused his ideas of worsening the quality of Brazilian education as well as producing a “communist brainwashing” of students (Haddad, 2019; Waisbord, 2020). Organisations such as *Escola sem Partido* (Schools without Political Parties), founded in 2004 but strengthened after the *Jornadas de Junho*, called for parents and students to watch over teachers and academics that allegedly promoted “Marxist” or “left-wing” ideas. This organisation even gathered twenty thousand signatures in order to request the National Congress to strip Freire of his title of patron of Brazilian education, initiative that ultimately failed (Haddad, 2019). Attacks on Freire however deepened during the campaign and subsequent presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, with his ministers, sons and himself disparaging against Freire on speeches, interviews and social media (Waisbord, 2020).

These attacks are significant on two levels. Firstly, they are founded on a fallacy. Despite their portrayal of Freire as the dominant figure shaping educational policies by the Workers’ Party governments, Freirean principles continued having only a limited effect in formal institutions in Brazil. The legacy of Paulo Freire can today be more effectively found across non-formal settings, where it has continued to inspire participatory communication, acts of citizenship as well as attempts to reconfigure conditions of solidarity (Gohn, 2009; Peruzzo, 2008; Tufte, 2017). Second, and related to the previous point, the attacks are particularly serious, because they aimed to unsettle core principles guiding Brazil’s civil society in the last few decades. In other words, the perceived “danger” of Freire’s ideas is due to their deep entrenchment beyond traditional political structures. For that reason, it is unsurprising that the attacks prompted a fierce defence and re-embrace of Paulo Freire and his legacy, beyond political parties or left-wing organisations, not only in Brazil but also in the rest of the world.

## The legacy of Paulo Freire across Brazil's contemporary civil society

Although attacks against Freire and his legacy are by no means new (Haddad, 2019), the most recent assault can also be seen as a spark that put him and his work back at the centre of public discussion. Paulo Freire is not in the background anymore and his ideas have arguably regained a greater influence, particularly in a context in which many of the material and symbolic inequalities highlighted by Freire not only persist, but have also been amplified by culture wars, institutionalised fake news and disputes around the definition of truth.

Although, as discussed above, the Freirean thinking has struggled in its attempts to be incorporated within systems and institutions (see also Haddad, 2019; Singh, 2008), it can effectively be found across civic engagement initiatives in Brazil and elsewhere. Hence, rather than representing the embodiment of specific policies or formal educational projects, Paulo Freire has become a key symbol and inspiration that has influenced a broad gamut of civil society for decades, even beyond the straitjacket of left-wing organisations or political parties. His politics of hope, emphasis on dialogue, community building, recognition that people are knowledgeable, calls for social critique and solidarity continue to be guiding forces driving participatory communication practices as well as the aspirations of Brazil's civil society in various attempts to transform reality.

It is not surprising then that Freire's conceptual and symbolical character (re) emerges in a moment of exhaustion of a political cycle in Brazil and across the world. For Breno Bringel, this moment breaks "a complex balance —and of variable geometry— between neoliberalism and social policies that sought to minimize the impact of structural inequalities in capitalism itself, keeping alive, however, a democratizing and rights imaginary" (2018: 22). While conservative and right-wing actors blame him for what he represents of a failure in the achievement of privileges, progressive and left-wing actors recall his legacy to claim a level of equity and critical emancipation that has never been fully accomplished.

This legacy of Freire's philosophy and set of values continues to spill into new democratic developments in Brazil. In the articles that follow in this special issue, this legacy is unpacked in more detail exploring mainly a couple of civil society

related case studies, but also how Freire influences knowledge production and how cultural institutions negotiate Freirean legacy in exploring the future of creative economy.

Jorge González explores the intersections between knowledge construction and individual and collective empowerment. His article brings a dialogue between Freire, the Genetic Epistemology of Jean Piaget, and his own threefold approach to communication and knowledge. In this perspective, information, communication and knowledge are three inseparable conditions for development.

Cássia Ayres and Cicilia Peruzzo reveal a complex intersection between dialogue and the ability to (re)writing the world among young Brazilians after 2018 elections. The authors' analyses point to a context of "pernicious polarization" (Vrydagh & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020) in which intolerance and hostility makes young people "fear of expressing themselves not only in the online environment, but also face-to-face". The article highlights youth critical perspective towards digital resources and environment, suggesting they are keen to engage with social networks affordances without losing their agency over the communication process.

Leonardo Custódio and Monica Gathuo report on the challenges of building dialogue and conscientization between scholars and activists in the field of racial marginalization reflecting upon their experience in the ARMA Alliance. As they reflect, although Freire's thoughts were not explicitly part of the original theoretical framework of the project, they were important drivers that became more visible in the course of the development of the actions.

Lima's article addresses the political-discursive use of Paulo Freire's as it manifests itself in the new museology in Brazil. Lima argues that this segment of the museum's field represents a multicultural and developmentalist project which claims to be epistemologically associated with Freire's ideas in order to make its identity suitable to inclusive discourses. However, Lima argues, these renewed museological perspectives have named initiatives with the Freirian lexicon whose



practices are in line with liberal ethics. Thereby, he sheds light upon a paradox which adds nuances and complexities to the processes of citizenship development as it is articulated through this cultural policy.

Finally, Conceição et al. propose a double review under an innovative and provocative format. The article reproduces a collaborative reflection between one researcher, Paola Sartoretto, one film director, Camila Freitas, and two peasants, militants of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* —MST (Landless Workers Movement in Brazil)—, Bete Cerqueira da Conceição y Luiz Enrique Gomes de Moura, searching to build a dialogue regarding the construction of a collective narrative for the film *Chao*, which tells the story of one MST settlement. It proposes a living reflection in the level of participatory practices in film making and in the metalevel of inclusive formats and approaches in the scientific work.

Altogether, these articles shed light upon communicational fundamentals in Freire's works and thoughts. Some deal with communication issues more explicitly. All of them approach in one way or another how communication should not have a separate place in civil society development, as it is not a tool, but a full part of the liberating experience of building an emancipated society.

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